

A EUROPEAN UNION OF CITIZENS

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With the European Parliament elections looming at the beginning of June, and with the global economic crisis casting its shadow over the continent, one reasonably might ask what the future holds for the European Union. The specific issue has been discussed in extent by a number of scholars, politicians and citizens since the inception of the EU, and yet no definitive answer has been given.

The future of the European Union is tantamount to that of the continent and the stability that has been achieved since World War II. It can be argued that the EU is the greatest successful peace experiment in the history of the world, even greater than the United Nations itself. What was, until fairly recently (51 years ago) a continent beleaguered by conflict and dominated by nationalism, became a functioning union of states that thrived through dialogue and cooperation.

Five years ago the EU entered a pivotal phase in its evolution. The once 15-strong union opened its doors to eight eastern European states, Cyprus and Malta in what has been the largest enlargement phase in its history. On April 30 2004 the EU "went to bed" having 15 member states, and "woke up" on 1 May with 25 member states. In 2007 the EU grew further when it welcomed Romania and Bulgaria. Today it is the home of 492 million European citizens.

Enlargement did not end with these new 12 member states. Croatia is a stone's throw from becoming an EU member, bar its border dispute with Slovenia. Turkey has already started its accession negotiations, regardless of where they may lead, the Former Yugoslav Republic of Macedonia is poised to start its negotiations soon, Albania submitted its application for membership to the current Czech EU Presidency in April, Serbia signed a Stability Pact with the EU in 2008 (the antechamber for an EU membership application), and a

number of Western Balkan and Eastern Europe states also vie EU membership. And with the outbreak of the global financial crisis, Iceland, which had not wished to become an EU member, is now seeking a fast-track membership process in order to achieve greater economic stability.

Besides the "political" debate as to what constitutes the EU, another problem arises by the sudden explosion in size of the EU. How to keep the enlarged Union functional. The two treaties defining how the EU operates, the Treaty on the European Union (Maastricht) and the Treaty establishing the European Community (Rome), are seriously insufficient to guarantee the operation of an enlarged EU. The EU has become too large, bureaucratic and cumbersome to exercise effective policy.

Enter the Treaty of Lisbon. The Treaty, the evolution of the EU Constitution rejected by the French and Dutch 2006 referenda, aims to transform the EU into a more flexible body, an absolute necessity in a fast moving world. Upon ratification of the Treaty, the EU will have a common external voice and a stronger, more flexible legislative authority. However, just like the EU Constitution, ratification of the Lisbon Treaty is facing hurdles. While the Treaty was supposed to be ratified by all member states by the end of 2008 in order to become effective after the 2009 EP elections, a rejection of the Treaty in a referendum in Ireland, the only member to hold one, jeopardized its future, So did a number of Euro-skeptic governments opposing more power yielded to Brussels, such as those of Poland and the Czech Republic, which delayed the ratification process. However, a repeat referendum in Ireland, expected to get a positive vote in light of the economic woes the country is facing, has put its ratification back on track.

This necessity for an operational EU has never been more apparent than during two recent major events: the global economic crisis, and the outbreak of novel flu (H1N1). On both occasions the EU has exhibited a frightening inability to come to consensus and an effective set of common measures in dealing with the crises. Of greater concern is the fact that these were not

traditional topics of economic, trade or external policy, these were a common and indiscriminate "enemy" to all EU member states, and the entire body of EU citizens. The only level on which some cohesion was achieved by EU member states is the response to the economic crisis by members of the euro-zone. And that can be attributed to a large extent to the macro-level control that the European Central Bank exercises on the economy of the 16 member states. All other responses by the EU, be it the Commission, Parliament or Council, are being criticized as being either too weak or too late.

It becomes apparent that EU policy continues to be dictated by national interests, policy, and economic ideology. Such an EU, focused on national issues and not common goals, endangers the idea of a common EU policy on all matters, both important and unimportant. And a nationalistic approach of European politics invariably leads to a lack of interest in it by citizens. The elections for members of the European Parliament are a prime and timely example. The elections for the most democratic body of the EU, with its members elected directly by the people every five years since 1979, regularly records high abstention rates of close to 60%.

So, no matter what the future of the EU maybe, with or without the ratification of the Lisbon Treaty by all member states, with the EU taking a federal or a confederal form, or even with the EU reverting to being a huge economic interests group or a "grand-bazaar," one thing is for certain. It must engage and involve its citizens.